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Pentagon Reassesses Soviet Bomber

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 30 — The Defense Intelligence Agency has significantly lowered its estimate of the range of a Soviet bomber that has figured in the Geneva arms talks, Reagan Administration officials said today.

Administration experts said the new estimate reinforced the contention by some arms-control proponents that the bomber, known in the West as the Backfire, was designed to attack ships and targets in Europe and Asia, not in the United States.

The new, lower intelligence agency estimate of the bomber's range raises questions about the Administration's decision to treat the Backfire as part of Moscow's long-range nuclear arsenal in the Geneva talks.

But some Administration officials said they expected the United States to keep to its position that the Backfire should be limited by any future arms control agreement because the Soviet Union could add to the bomber's refueling capabilities.

Potential Threat Debated

The potential threat of the Backfire to the United States mainland was hotly debated in the late 1970's by supporters and opponents of the 1979 treaty to limit strategic nuclear arms.

The Backfire was not defined as a "heavy bomber" in that treaty. In return the Soviet Union assured the United States in a side agreement that

the production rate of the bomber would not exceed 30 a year, and that Moscow would not give the Backfire the capability to carry out intercontinental missions.

During the treaty debate, Carter Administration officials said that the bomber's ability to carry out intercontinental strikes was limited. They also maintained that any effort to classify the Backfire as a strategic bomber would lead the Soviet Union to step up its demands for limits on American aircraft based in Europe, a restriction opposed by the United States.

But critics of the 1979 treaty said that the Backfire should be treated as a heavy bomber, saying the plane could carry a heavy weapons load to attack the United States and then return to the Soviet Union or land at Cuban airfields.

Intelligence Agencies Differ

Adding fuel to the controversy was a split between the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency over the bomber's range. The C.I.A. took the less threatening view of the bomber's range and armament.

The Soviet Union insisted throughout the treaty talks and since that the bomber lacked the range to mount a credible threat to the United States.

The Reagan Administration's position at the Geneva arms talks has been that the Backfire should be counted as a heavy bomber. And the Pentagon's latest report on Soviet military power expressed the former Defense Intelligence Agency view that the Backfire had a unrefueled combat range of about 3,000 miles. That range assumes the bomber will fly at a high altitude to conserve fuel, came in low for an attack and then resume its high-altitude flight. Some military analysts say that tactic is unrealistic because it would make the bomber easier to detect and to destroy.

With the revision, "the Defense Intelligence Agency has moved substantially in the direction of the C.I.A.," an Administration official said. Another official described the situation as one of "basic harmony" for the American intelligence branches over the plane's capabilities, although the two agencies still differ slightly on the aircraft's range.

Range estimates depend on several variables, including the amount of weapons carried and the flight altitude. Officials were reluctant to give specific estimates of the bomber's revised range, but one ventured it could be about 20 percent less when fully loaded than the previous military intelligence figure.

The revised estimate stems from several factors, officials said, including new information about the plane's fuel consumption. Pentagon officials said the new projections indicated the plane could not carry out a round-trip mission against the United States with-

out midair refueling. They also said the new estimates implied that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the aircraft to carry a large payload on a one-way mission and then land in Cuba after dropping its bombs.

The intelligence reports also show that the Backfire lacks special probes needed for in-flight refueling. The officials added that the Soviet Union in any case did not have enough aerial tankers to refuel the Backfire and other aircraft on very long-range missions.

But they said it was not known whether the aircraft has the internal mechanism to handle in-flight fueling should probes be added to the plane and new tankers built.

Arms experts differed over the significance of the new estimates. "It does put Soviet intransigence on this issue in a different light," said Raymond L. Garthoff, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a longtime arms control expert. He said it showed that the Soviet position was more reasonable than some American officials had thought.

One Administration official argued that the intelligence report settled the long-standing debate over the bomber and established that it should not be in the "strategic category."

But a Pentagon official disagreed, saying: "While the question of the bomber range may be an important debating point for analysts, it is not central to the military significance of the aircraft. Nobody claims that the Backfire cannot reach the U.S. if based in arctic regions and if it is refueled."

He added that the new range figures showed "the uncertain nature we have even today of Soviet systems and the problems inherent in intelligence gathering."

Another official said, "It remains a heavy bomber and something we cannot ignore in our total assessment of Soviet strategic capabilities."